

Mayor Scott Avedisian, Westerly Town Council President Diana S. Avedesian and Jason Lin, of the Westerly Innovations Network, announced today the City of Warwick's plans to join forces with an innovative group of five Westerly sixth grade students, who have developed a successful program in their town to collect waste cooking oil and convert it into biodiesel fuel credits for needy families.

The students call themselves the Junior WIN team and are part of the Westerly Innovations Network, a student-led, non-profit community problem solving team. Their innovative program – called Project T.G.I.F, or Turn Grease Into Fuel – is already well established in the Town of Westerly and has earned them recognition on the national level.

Project TGIF established the state's first public cooking oil recycling location for all South County residents at the Westerly transfer station. Residents are encouraged to bring their local waste cooking oil to be recycled rather than to pour it down the drain, where it can damage septic or sewer systems.

To date, Project TGIF has 77 participating restaurants, with the number increasing monthly. In 2009, more than 3,000 gallons of grease was collected each month – resulting in a donation of over 4,000 gallons of Bioheat® to three local Southern New England charitable organizations to help heat needy families' homes.

"Westerly could not be prouder of the WIN kids. We have witnessed over the years their innovative spirit that has consistently seen ideas transformed into action. Under the guidance of Jason Lin, the students have always seen the field for the trees; the bigger picture. Their understanding of environmental issues and their positive, proactive approach to going "green" has inspired our community and our state," Westerly Town Council President Diana S. Avedesian said. "I have enjoyed a wonderful relationship with Jason and his brilliant and dedicated son Alex – WIN pioneer – and the entire community has benefitted by the wisdom and innovation of this group from recycling e-waste to the current project – TGIF. Westerly could not be any prouder of these young people, our future leaders."

The students, noting the City of Warwick's record on environmental preservation and other statistics, felt Warwick would be a logical community in which to expand the program, and made an initial presentation to Mayor Avedisian several weeks before the floods.

In addition to the City's extensive recycling program, the students estimate that Warwick's 36,000 households and more than 100 restaurants have the potential of generating 200,000 gallons of biodiesel per year. They also noted that Fats, Oils and Grease (FOG) is a leading cause of clogs in municipal sewer systems.

"We are grateful to Sue Stenhouse from the Governor's office who introduced us and the TGIF program to Mayor Avedisian," Lin said. "Mayor Avedisian has an excellent track record for protecting the environment for the city of Warwick. With his support, the junior WIN team believes that project TGIF will be a success in Warwick and will make Warwick a model city for grease recycling in America. "

“We are looking forward to working with the Junior WIN program to bring this program to Warwick and have it fully operational by the fall,” Mayor Avedisian said. “Our Sewer Authority Executive Director, Janine Burke, Public Works Director David Picozzi and Lauren Slocum, the president and CEO of the Central Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce, have all pledged their support of this initiative – which won’t cost the city anything, but will help to improve the efficacy of our sewer treatment system, help the environment, and benefit some of our most vulnerable citizens.”

It will also, he said, complement the WSA’s ongoing educational outreach efforts about the need to reduce FOG and expand the city’s extensive recycling program.

Mayor Avedisian said a fall start date will allow his staff and the WSA and DPW time to complete flood repairs and related issues, work with the students on details of the program and actively promote it to citizens and businesses in advance of the its launch.

Among the recognitions the students have earned for this project are:

- 2009-2010 President’s Environmental Youth Awards by the Environmental Protection Agency. The team was invited to go to Washington D.C. to receive the awards;
- The junior team won the 2010 SeaWorld/Busch Gardens Environmental Excellence Awards and \$10,000. The junior WIN team was also the only middle school team among the winners; most of the other teams were juniors and seniors in the high school;
- TGIF won the grand prize and \$5,000 of Ashoko Youth Venture / Best Buy’s @15 community impact challenge. The winners were selected by on-line votes from 15 finalists. Again, the junior WIN team was the youngest team in the competition;
- Project TGIF was selected as one of the eight finalists of the 2010 Christopher Columbus Awards.

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